

Exercise Planners: Failure Now Could Mean Success Later In Real Life

Press Release

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PETERSON AIR FORCE BASE, Colo. ? No one wants to fail. But sometimes, failure in the present can lead to success in the future.

At least that is how Marine Col. Gene Pino sees it.

As director of the North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command training and exercise division here, Pino, and his staff, build failure into portions of homeland defense and civil support exercise scenarios. Not to make anyone look bad but to give first responders and military members a chance to work out solutions to problems they may face in the real world.

Col. Gene Pino, USMC, responds to media queries following a disaster

preparedness exercise.

Photo credit: Department of Defense

?Our exercises are not ever designed to give the American people the idea that we can?t defend this country or prevent terrorists from executing events,? said Pino. But, he said, ?In our world we have to practice both the defense against an attack and then allow (events) to happen so we can practice mitigating the effects.?

Following the recent NORAD and USNORTHCOM multi-level, multi-state disaster preparedness exercise, ?Amalgam Virgo? and ?Determined Promise ?04, Pino explained the rationale for designing scenarios that resulted in the simulated death of thousands of people as well as property losses in the millions of dollars.

?To maximize training for all participants, there has to be exercise artificiality that says, ?some of this happened? so we can train on the other end,? said Pino. It would be ?extremely shortsighted on our part? not to train that way, he said.

In AV/DP04, Department of Defense and non-DOD agencies had to gather and share information, not only to intercept the terrorists, but also to prevent them from doing more harm.

Exercise scenarios included the release of sarin, mustard and chlorine gases; tunnel and bridge explosions; the launch of unmanned aerial vehicles; detonation of a ?dirty bomb;? multiple hijackings of commercial airliners; and the derailment of a chemical-laden train.

While simulating the deaths of some 10,000 people may give the impression that ?we?re not good,? Pino said playing out such scenarios was ?an important element of the exercise.? After all, the disaster preparedness exercise was also designed to stretch the resources of local, state and federal agencies from Virginia to California and from Florida to Canada, said Pino.

He explained that the exercises are built on ?a strong intelligence platform? to ensure that agencies at every level ?are poised to engage (a real-life) threat.? More than 60 agencies participated in the recent exercise, which command officials deemed ?an extraordinary success.?

Pino said he even briefed Department of Homeland Security agencies before the exercise so those agencies could ?fully? participate. ?The goal of these disaster exercises is always to save lives and mitigate the problems of the people who are going to be living with the events for awhile.?

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AV/DP04 participants walked through the exact steps necessary in a real-world situation, said Pino. While much of the exercise was simulated, some scenarios involved "live" action, including "aircraft physically interacting with rogue aircraft and rogue ships," Pino said.

"We had firefighters, police officers and FBI agents physically doing what they needed to do at that first layer on the ground. We also had people role-playing victims, terrorists, the whole works."

USNORTHCOM even deployed a joint task force to the Commonwealth of Virginia during the simulated explosion at a speedway, Pino said. But what impressed Pino most about the exercise and what made him "feel good about where USNORTHCOM is," was the "physical involvement by the leaders of this country."

He said California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and Virginia Governor Mark Warner provided real-time responses.

"Governor Schwarzenegger actually went into his emergency operations center," Pino said state authorities relayed that it was the first time a governor had done that for an exercise. "They said he got his operations center personnel together and gave them a pep talk and told them how important the exercise was."

In Virginia, Warner conducted on-camera interviews with "WNN-TV," the command's "synthetic CNN-type network," Pino said. Warner talked about how his state was handling the disasters and what they were doing to calm people's fears.

There were some challenges during the exercise, Pino said. "We learned some things that we need to focus on, work on and do better."

For instance, he said, "we learned that, when the temperature is 94 degrees and people are wearing protective equipment, you need to rotate people faster." Participants also experienced some of the "psychological affects of dealing with the dead," said Pino. "You need to address that and have counselors and family assistance programs available."

According to the colonel, there will probably never come a time when exercise participants receive a perfect grade because there will always be new people on staff, new concepts of operations and new procedures and tactics.

"I don't think there will ever be a time when you conduct an exercise where every one is synchronized and knows exactly what they are doing. But from an institutional level, we are definitely getting better, not only as a result of this exercise but also because the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has a strong exercise program, too."

"In fact, we are partnering with DHS next year in a national exercise program for homeland security. It will be a team effort between DHS, DOD, Health and Human Services, the Department of Energy and all the federal partners so we can be synchronized in all of our training. And, if we're synchronized in our training, I think we will be synchronized in our support when something happens," Pino said.